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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates the utility of interdependence theory for understanding older persons' social relationships. Using friendship as an exemplary case, a model of expectations for and reactions to social exchanges is described. Exchanges which are perceived to be motivated by obligation are distinguished from those which are perceived to emerge from voluntary responses such as caring. These differential explanations of interaction are discussed in terms of their implications for relationship substitution and relationship satisfaction in old age. (Author/JAC)

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Aging and Interdependence: A Theoretical Model for Close Relationships

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Theoretical Framework for Studying Adult Social Relationships

Introduction

Recognizing that gerontological research must be grounded in theory in order to proceed from unrelated descriptions of various phenomena to integrated explanations of behavior and adaptation in old age, recent authors (e.g., Maddox & Wiley, 1976) have discussed the merits of social exchange theory for this purpose. Dowd (1975, 1978, 1980) applied principles of exchange theory to analyze the aging process at the societal level. He addressed issues such as power and intergenerational conflict, based on research in the areas of social stratification, status generalization, and age segregation. According to Dowd's analysis, older people possess fewer resources than younger people, and thus are in a relatively powerless and disadvantaged position in society. He concluded that the elderly are likely to find interaction with age peers more rewarding than exchanges with younger members of society. While Dowd's assertations follow from the tenets of exchange theory as applied to sociological constructs, a great deal of empirical work remains to be done to test such a position. To do so, it is necessary to move from the societal to the dyadic level of analysis; social exchange principles are also appropriate for the social psychological assessment of specific dyadic interaction processes and cutcomes (see Burgess & Huston, 1979). Application of the exchange orientation to research at the dyadic level of analysis would contribute to the advancement of a theory of social behavior in old age, since it would permit study of the ways old people implement their resources, their views of the adequacy of their current resources, their means of coping with power imbalances, and so forth.

Interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) is concerned not only with exchanges and interactional rewards and costs but also with the interpersonal coordination of actions. This theory appears to be especially well suited to research focusing on dyadic interaction. The following three points summarize this conceptual framework and illustrate how it extends social exchange theory: (1) Partners in close relationships are interdependent; that is, they influence each other's interaction outcomes, with both harmonious results and conflict of interest possible. (2) Partners in close relationships are responsive to each other's outcomes in the sense that they take into account the consequences of various actions for each other. (3) Partners in close relationships make attributions about the causes of each person's responsiveness (or lack thereof). This approach supports examination of numerous issues pertaining to the content of exchanges, perceptions about reciprocity and equity in interaction, motivations for and interpretations of various actions, and the developmental course of relationships. None of these topics have been studied very extensively in relation to social interaction in late adulthood, yet detailed information about the nature of interdependence at this stage of life is vital for a theory of old age social behavior. The following sections address the application of each of the three major interdependence theory components to research with older adults.

Interdependence

One way of assessing interdependence is to examine the kinds of resources that older people exchange with various members of their social network, and the reciprocity of these exchanges. A conceptual framework for identifying the content of social exchanges was presented by Foa and

Foa (1974, 1975) in their resource theory. These researchers classified interpersonal resources into six broad categories according to the meaning assigned to various actions. The categories are money, goods, information, services, status, and love. This model differentiates exchanges of giving and of receiving each type of resource, and locates each in terms of two dimensions: (1) particularism, which ranges from particular to universal, is "the extent to which the value of a given resource is influenced by the particular persons involved in exchanging it and by their relationship" (Foa & Foa, 1974, p. 80); and (2) concreteness, which ranges from concrete to symbolic, is "the form or type of expression characteristic of the various resources (Foa & Foa, 1974, p. 81). On the first dimension, love is the most particularistic resource category and money is the most universal; the most concrete categories are goods and services while status and information are the most symbolic categories of the second dimension. Regarding reciprocity, Foa and Foa found that a person is more likely to return a resource in the same class as the one given to him or her, and the receipt of a resource often depends on the nature of the one that is offered.

Recently, a direct test of the relationships among resource categories yielded partial support of resource theory (Ryan & Willis, 1980). A multidimensional scaling analysis of college students' perceptions of resource exchanges revealed three major dimensions: quantity, evaluation, and particularism. Quantity (a lot or a little) was an important influence on both the evaluation (positive or negative) and the particularism of a resource. The study also showed that there is a perceived difference between giving negative resources (e.g., expressing hate) and taking positive resources (e.g., withdrawing love), with the former rated

more consistently negative than the latter. The authors did not find a dimension of concreteness, "perhaps...because it is important only as a determinant of conditions of exchangeability (e.g., how much of a resource can be exchanged) and subjects in this study were presumably required to assume exchangeability" (Ryan & Willis, 1980, p. 9). At any rate, the study does support Foa and Foa's contention that the meaning of social exchanges varies with the type of resource involved.

It also seems reasonable to expect that the meaning of social exchanges varies with regard to the exchange partner. This assumption is inherent in Foa and Foa's concept of particularism. As Levinger (1974) pointed out, highly particularistic resources are likely to be appreciated most in personal relationships and least in impersonal ones; at the same time, the return of an impersonal resource (such as money) after receiving a personal one (such as love) would probably be perceived as inappropriate and perhaps even insulting. Social network research also shows that the causal bases of interaction differ across relationship types. Although the results of various studies provide some conflicting evidence about the nature of the differential interactions, those with friends are usually described as voluntary and reciprocal, while contacts with relatives are often influenced by obligation as well as by emotional ties (e.g., Adams, 1967; Hochschild, 1973; Shulman, 1975). Considerable mutual aid has been reported between both kin and nonkin (Lowenthal & Robinson, 1976), but the particulars of older adults' exchanges of each type of resource with various social network members have not yet been specified.

To summarize, interdependence can be viewed in terms of the exchange of resources; the extent of interdependence is a function of the degree

to which partners provide each other with resources that are considered desirable and appropriate. Given the differential availability of resources across age and social status groups, one might predict greater interdependence between pairs who are homogeneous as opposed to heterogeneous in salient characteristics. However, modifying factors such as the substitutability of resources and changes in exchange expectations with aging remain to be investigated.

Responsiveness

The second component of interdependence theory emerges from the observation that people are concerned not only about their own outcomes, but also about those of others. According to Kelley (1979), responsiveness becomes evident when a person, out of consideration for the effects on the partner, chooses a line of action that is different from the one he or she would have done without taking the other into account. This action may, for example, optimize the long-run outcomes for both partners, with more rewarding results to each than might have occurred without such responsiveness.

Examples of responsiveness can be found in several lines of research. For instance, it underlies Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) notion of comparison level: People in close relationships have the tendency to compare their actual outcomes to those they think they deserve, and to those of their partner; they are dissatisfied if their outcomes do not meet their own standards and match or exceed their partner's outcomes. Another example is given in the concept of equity (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979), which holds that partners strive for interaction outcomes which are proportional to their respective investments in and costs of participating in their relationships. They feel distress if they perceive themselves

to be either underbenefited or overbenefited compared to the partner or other possible partners.

As to research on responsiveness in older adults, there are, as yet, no studies of the extent or consequences of such a phenomenon in the later years. Direct study of older peoples' responsiveness in specific relationships could lead to greater understanding of exchange processes in late life. For example, the connection between the extent of responsiveness experienced in the past and current levels of resource exchange could be investigated. Persons who have been involved throughout adulthood in mutually responsive relationships have gained experience and skill in negotiating exchanges within that social context, and are likely to feel confident in their ability to satisfy their own needs while at the same time meeting the needs of their partners in a reciprocal manner. Such people may feel comfortable about asking for help in times of stress or crisis in old age, and may have a larger repertoire of skills for redressing resource imbalances. This in turn might lead to more positive feelings about the adequacy of resources (since the possibility of resource substitution may be realized). Also, people with a history of responsive relationships may be more likely to interpret current exchanges with both age peers and members of younger generations as fair, despite an outsider's perception of imbalances.

Research which assesses current levels of social network support for older people does not take into account the history of responsiveness between the focal person and significant others. Therefore, it is not accurate to conclude that old people who appear to be without support or social contacts have lost interaction skills and/or valued resources. Perhaps they had been "isolated" all along; only longitudinal research or a reliable method of gathering retrospective data will provide a definitive answer.

Attributions about Responsiveness

Humans strive to explain the causes of their own and other's behavior so they can simplify interaction, predict outcomes of various lines of action, depend on certain consistencies, anticipate change, and so on. Kelley (1979) demonstrated that partners in close relationships assume that each other's interpersonal behavior is based upon a combination of the perceived direct consequences of specific actions, as discussed above, and stable, general dispositions which they attribute to each other. Partners seek certain attitudes, values, and traits in each other, and they wish to display certain qualities in their own behavior. The display of positive properties is rewarding in the present and provides reassurance about compatible future interaction; conversely, exhibition of negative properties is cost-inducing and foretells of potential problems in the relationship. Thus, personal dispositions have important affective consequences in a close relationship, and actions based on responsiveness are likely to be seen as evidence of caring.

The lack of empirical evidence about patterns of responsiveness in older adults' relationships precludes any findings concerning the effects of attributing responsiveness or nonresponsiveness to personal characteristics of the partner. However, we do know that the elderly characterize their friends, for example, as understanding, accepting, trusting, supportive, compatible, likeable, and so on (e.g., Weiss & Lowenthal, 1977). Presumably, these qualities emerged in the course of shared activities in which a person observed the partner's responsiveness and attributed its cause to one or more of the above dispositions.

Summary

Interdependence theory posits that people in close relationships affect

each other's rewards and costs, attend to the ways they influence their outcomes, and attribute each other's behavior to stable, personal dispositions. This framework provides a basis for formulating propositions and testing hypotheses about social interaction processes and outcomes. It can be fruitfully applied to the study of resource exchanges between older adults and members of their social network, with potential contribution to explaining the dynamics of social behavior in late life.

An Illustrative Example: Friendship in Late Adulthood

A number of researchers have described the demographic characteristics of older people who have friends, and those of their friends (Booth, 1972; Petrowsky, 1976; Powers & Bultena, 1976). Also, the traits which are attributed to elderly friends have been identified (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1977), and several researchers have examined the connection between friendships or confidant relationships and life satisfaction (Arling, 1976; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Mancini, 1980). However, there is little information dealing specifically with the dynamics and meaning of friendship among the elderly. Interdependence theory provides a useful set of guidelines for examining friendship processes and consequences in late adulthood. For example, a number of issues could be addressed for each of the three essential elements of close relationships; answers to questions such as the following would enhance our understanding of the elderly's friendships.

Research Questions about Interdependence

1. How much, and in what ways, is an elderly person (P) influenced by a friend (F)?

2. What resources do P and F exchange? How often?

3. How do P and F resolve problems of exchange (such as failure of one partner to give benefits to his or her friend while receiving them)?

4. How much and in what ways are P and F influenced by their joint actions, and how do they coordinate their joint actions?

Research Questions about Responsiveness

1. In what ways are P and F responsive to each other's interactional outcomes?

2. How do past experiences in other mutually responsive relationships (or lack thereof) influence the current interaction patterns in friendship?

3. What are the effects of asymmetrical responsiveness on friendship?

Research Questions about Dispositional Attributions

1. What traits and attitudes do P and F attempt to display, and what ones do they attribute to each other?

2. What interactional events form the basis for the attributions that P and F make about each other?

3. What are the barriers that prevent F from understanding P in the way that P understands her/himself?

4. What constellation of traits and attitudes promotes satisfying friendships in late adulthood?

Research Notes

These questions are stated in very general terms, and the next step is to identify specific variables that could be used to measure aspects of interdependence, responsiveness, and dispositional attributions in friendship. Kelley (1979) provides several examples of the operationalization of pertinent variables for heterosexual dating relationships; the suggested techniques could easily be extended to other relationships as well.

A variety of data-gathering techniques may be used in research on these essential elements of close relationships. A great deal of relevant information could be gathered by direct questioning in interviews or written

surveys. In addition, experiments could be conducted in which friend pairs respond to varying situational stimuli, and observations of naturally-occurring friend interaction could be recorded. Use of a combination of methods in an integrated research program is likely to generate a data set rich in detail about friendship dynamics and meaning.

A final suggestion concerning the investigation of interdependence, responsiveness, and dispositional attributions in late adulthood is to assess a given friendship from the perspective of both partners. Data based on the self-reported activities, perceptions, and feelings of both persons is likely to yield a more accurate portrayal of the relationship than data based on the views of just one of the friends (cf. Thompson & Walker, 1981). Such dyadic data have not yet been gathered for the friendships of the elderly.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to summarize the theory of interdependence which Kelley (1979) has used to study dating and marriage relationships, and to show how it can be applied to friendships as well. Since detailed examination of dyadic interaction has typically been carried out with college student samples (e.g., Derlega, Wilson, & Chaikin, 1976; La Gaipa, 1977) and young adult married couples (e.g., Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977) there is a dearth of similar information about other age groups and other relationships. Interdependnece theory, an extension of the social exchange approach, provides a conceptual framework for developing research questions about friendship processes and outcomes. Research grounded in interdependence theory should provide a more comprehensive view of the elderly's close relationships than that which currently exists.

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